



Intention in G.E.M. Anscombe (1919–2001)

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G.E.M. Anscombe's book *Intention* did much to revive interest in the topic and, despite its difficulty, is still considered a classic in the philosophy of action. According to Anscombe, intentional actions are ones done for some reason, actions about which it makes sense to ask 'Why did you do that?' In response to such a question we can expect an answer that explains what significance the action is, or was, taken to have by the agent. This significance is the intention *with which* a person acts. The intention is a part or an aspect of the act, not a prior event that causes it. This is contrary to the mainstream view of action and intention.

If an intention were a mental object or event that caused actions, Anscombe argues, then it would appear to be quite possible to be ignorant of one's own intentions. We might indeed be so ignorant in some cases, but these are exceptions, not the rule. Normally we know what we are doing (what we intend). Otherwise, human life would be utterly obscure. If we want to understand other people's behavior, then, not only can we not look at the causes of their behavior (since, for one thing, we cannot see inside their brains) but even trying to do so would be a mistake. We need to know what they take themselves to be doing, how they understand their actions. And people engaged in action do not obtain this knowledge from observation of their own behavior. In this sense we know what we are doing even if in fact something is going wrong and we are not getting done what we mean to be getting done. Intention is embodied, and visible, in action, not some hidden psychological mystery.

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